The way we look at things around here.

By Andrew Wells[1].   September 2018

I imagine you may well be familiar with well rehearsed lines of patter about organisational culture. Culture is our values and beliefs, which we tacitly assume beforehand at the beginning of a course of action or line of argument. Culture is our shared sense of identity and belonging, referenced to our corporate heritage. Then there is the perennially popular: "it's the way we do things around here".

How about this: "it's the way we look at things around here"?

Where would that idea take us? For many business unit managers it would lead to a more easily implemented, faster and more effective approach to organisational culture, of more practical use to leaders in business organisations and on big complex projects.

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In the lexicon of "change management" there are two particular expressions which are used idiomatically and aired repeatedly. We hear these two ideas couched with varying words around them, but each time expressing the same substantive themes.

The first idea is about engaging with people and securing "buy-in" to the change we want to see. "Buy-in" is the idiom, as in: "we need to get buy-in from the executive team". Buy-in is the theme I wrote about recently in this essay's sibling: "Time for some leadership development? Start with WTF…"[2]. The context and focus for that essay was leadership development. The same tenets described there apply though to organisational transformation, or culture change, or sales force development, or safety, just as much as to leadership development. Change the words in the title, and thus the context, and the message, ideas and approach advocated are all just as relevant

The second idiom in common use is that of "looking through a lens", as in: to "look through a different lens", or to "change the lens we look through". The need to "look through a different lens" is often cited as a key step to shift mind-set and make progress on organisational change. The relevance of this idea is again ubiquitous. It applies equally well to shifting culture in respect to safety, sales, or service, to the transformation of departmental culture, to energising a team, to encouraging inclusion.

In "Start with WTF..." I describe the stages of a buying process, and how understanding that process can be applied to getting better buy-in to change. Unpick that thesis a little and you will see that there is a shift in thinking from regarding "buy-in" as a figurative expression to giving the idea a much more literal treatment: buy-in is an actual process that can be understood, and that knowledge used to advantage.

So what about "looking through a lens"? Might we take that more literally too?

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An email dropped into my mailbox from an old client who I had not seen in a while. The Regional Vice President for Europe, Middle East, Africa (EMEA) Human Resources at a global industrial Group. She had mailed excitedly from the Group's European Head Quarters.

"Look what we have achieved together!!!" She wrote. "Thank you and hope to catch up very soon."

Attached was information on an awards shortlist on which her company featured in the category of Best Change Management Initiative, with a project under the heading: "New Strategy, New Culture - creating the easy choice."

I looked up a link to the Group's Annual Report and the section of that which presented the progress of her Division, the Group's largest operating Division. I was interested to see how business was progressing. The narrative in the Annual Report described the business context in Europe at the time of rather sluggish market conditions and dampened demand. There was uncertainty in outlook for all the Division's major trading segments and territories. Against

a challenging backdrop though the Division was making clear headway: strengthening its positions across its territories, reinforcing its presence as a leader in service, technology and value, adapting to consolidation in trade customers and adding important underlying efficiency savings and operational improvements. I studied the numbers which further confirmed the health of the Division and the progress the management was making. The Division had advanced on its path towards becoming the leading and fastest growing supplier of choice for its sector.

Strategy focused the Division on building and sustaining leadership positions in core geographies, expanding its position in adjacent markets and capturing the opportunities offered by growth in emerging economies. Key themes were identified for delivering on customer expectations: anticipation of end-user needs, innovation, offering solutions on environmental issues, supply and route to market.

Woven into the fabric of the report alongside the description of how strategy was being executed were the ideals that underpinned my client's acclamation: the factors that drove her Division's culture.

"The Division," the narrative chimed, "now has a strong team in place, ready to share, simplify, execute and deliver on customer expectations."

Along the top of a picture of a gathering of smiling managers from across the Division ran the strap-line: "Being the easy choice for customers". The accompanying explanation set out that the EMEA team had put extensive effort into the alignment on a shared set of goals and values across the entire Division. It said that senior managers

from the Division's various businesses shared a common view on the way to engage all employees in the journey, on the way to better relate to customers and on the way to deliver effectively on target performance. What it left out though was the straightforward and accelerated way the common mindset that drove the Division's culture had been achieved.

The EMEA Division lived up to its name. It had an enormous geographical spread, and with that came a level of national cultural diversity to match. English was the general business lingua franca in the Group, but the senior ranks conversed in French and there were fourteen other major languages spoken in the course of doing business daily within the Division. The operations that made up the Division had grown through acquisition, but had developed as a gaggle of units rather than a coherent business. There was little benefit yet derived from being a Division. Profitable innovation in one place for example would be dismissed elsewhere as not-invented-here and an opportunity would be lost. Different factions would keep advantageous market information from each other and the separate businesses would regularly poach customers from one another. In some instances it was easier for a business unit to poach customers from a sibling company than from a rival and local strategies would be oriented to doing just that. Decision making was slow and moribund approvals processes neutered agility. Doing business with the company had become unwieldy and complicated. Staff were frustrated and demoralised. There was no sense of belonging to the Group but only to the fiefdom of the local General Manager.

The newly appointed Divisional CEO recognised that in a generally commoditising market there was advantage to be had if his business could leverage its human capital, diversity and size. The potential of the Division's "bigness" had gone missing in action somewhere along the line, and he was on a mission to get that back, to harness it and to get it to work for the business.

The brief was very straightforward. The Divisional CEO and his lead team had a stagnating business to turnaround, a large slice of the Group under their stewardship to meld into a vibrant engine for growth. The CEO was a demanding businessman, habitually and reassuringly "professionally unreasonable" in his approach to getting things to happen and the demands he placed on others. He had brought together a capable lead team. He was clear about the approach to culture that he wanted, and he applied the same basic stance.

"We are not going to spend huge sums on a culture programme," he said. "But we need our culture to change. Quickly."

The CEO was a seasoned business leader. It was the first time I had worked with him. He had been involved with culture change programmes before, as one would expect, in his case both as an underwhelmed protagonist and as an unhappy recipient. He was not generally a fan of culture change consultants, and he told me so. He wanted different, he was not buying the same old stuff again, and he made it clear, honestly at the start: there was not going to be a lengthy change programme to sell on here.

In response we shaped the approach we adopted together to get an accelerated shift in culture in a way that bypasses the need for any slow, consultant intensive, inculcation method typical of "culture change programmes". A simple switch was made. Rather than any attempt to

try to get people to think differently or pushing them through training courses and workshops to get them to act differently, as the main thrust for change we would rely simply and deliberately on getting the leaders in the organisation to ask others to look at things differently. Look differently, then act accordingly.

The main push back we got for this strategy was on the grounds that it surely could not be as simple as that. Culture change has to be more complicated and difficult! Where were the grand schemes with lots of workshops? No PowerPoint presentations? No project managed top-down? No culture change programme to roll-out? No piloting the approach in critical areas to demonstrate how good it could be, to convince others? No fan-fare launch? No three-year project? No.

There was just a very simple, consistent, coherent story for the lead team, and then others to take out, to start a conversation with. There was a lens to use, to look at things differently. To help the leaders in the organisation help others to make sense of where the Division was heading and what their role and contribution should be. To help leaders steer on a daily basis. To give them a story to start to use, and to act out, to demonstrate everywhere they went, wherever they went, whenever they went there. A story to tell using words only when necessary.

The flash story, the basis of the lens, was very simply this:

"Be the easy choice for our customers and our people. Have in mind each day, and with each business challenge: simplify, share, execute, deliver."

This short story sets out what being part of the Division was all about, for anyone and everyone in it. It makes clear what we want to be and what we want people to do.

The approach to change was actively to promote this perspective as the preferred one to take, then encourage and let change flow from that. Once change started to flow and change had momentum, it could be steered. The CEO and his team implicitly set out to get their people to buy-in to the beginning of a culture journey, and to come with them on it, and to contribute to creating a better, more compelling reality that benefited the business as the journey evolved. They did this rather than to start with an explicit visionary end-state and try to sell to their people that ideal.

"This," the lead team would say to people anywhere and everywhere as they travelled their territories, informally and especially formally down the line, "is how we want you to look at the way we do business, please: this is the lens we look through and the lens we want you to look through."

"This," they would go on to say, "is also how we want you to ask people around you to look at the way we do business, and how we want you to get your subordinates to look at things too."

Very shortly and with use, "want" could be replaced with "expect". The ask became an expectation, momentum started to build, and the culture started to shift. The corporation could start to build its processes around those simple ideals: to facilitate the way the organisation worked, to make it easy to work with and easy to work in. How to make things easy did not need much explaining to many people at all. Like most intelligent people they could figure that out for themselves, were best placed

to do so, and they had the innate volition to do it. They just needed asking, directing, steering, some real encouragement and an expectation that they would.

It is the case that some individuals, one or two of those quite senior in fact, did exit the organisation. Not everyone, particularly not everyone in a leadership role, will fit a shift in culture. A lot of success in building an organisational culture is in choosing the right people to be part of it in the first place. That was recognised from the start, but everyone was given opportunity to stay on board. The effect that turnover in key positions had served to build authenticity into the CEO's commitment, and bolstered confidence in what his lead team were building into the business and how they were going about doing that.

The shift in culture was fast, effective and soon became embedded. By introducing, promoting and insisting on a simple, coherent and consistent lens for people to look through, and making that an everyday act, meant that as decisions were taken on behalf of the organisation the outcome of that process became consistent with how the CEO and his lead team wanted it to be.

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In 2013 I was privileged to co-author a public intellectual report released by the University of Birmingham Business School and my company One Point Three Limited. The report was titled "What the business leader said to the MBA…"[3]. In the report we set out findings and an analysis of a series of interviews with elite business leaders conducted by post-graduate students on the international MBA programme from the School. The project that the MBA cohort undertook, as summer interns with One Point Three Limited, sought out the views, experience and wisdom of participants about organisational culture and competitive advantage through people, and the case for intervening on organisational culture and workforce engagement to get better business results.

"(The case for intervening) should be a persuasive argument around the ultimate performance of the firm, reflected either in commercial impact or in reputation terms, or measured by the effect it will have on our employees. It wouldn't have to be highly numerate and full of pay-back metrics. If it was a compelling argument that you as a trusted colleague of mine made, you would get it through very easily. Ultimately, ultimately the benefit has to be performance. What is the performance footprint? We're not in this to be nice people or to salute the flag. We're in this for performance."

That was one of the notable quotes we used in the report: a verbatim from a very successful businessman, who ran a sector leading corporation, employing 15,000 people, in Europe and North America.

Referring to a maxim attributed to, or perhaps even actually postulated by, Peter Drucker, he also said.

"I don't think culture "eats strategy for breakfast". I think that's nonsense, personally. But you should have no doubt about its importance. Most of my competitors have locations that look

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[3] *"What the business leader said to the MBA…" is available gratis via onepointthree.com*

exactly like mine. They have equipment that is the same as mine and which they buy from the same suppliers as we do. They have delivery vehicles that are exactly the same as mine. What makes my company different is its people. We could have the best equipment in our industry and the best physical locations, but without our people wanting to get out of bed and be winners, and really being motivated on a daily basis, then those assets are irrelevant."

He probably greatly underplays the quality of his strategic thinking and planning, tactical manoeuvre, implementation and administrative governance here, for rhetorical effect one would imagine, but his point resonates nonetheless. He went on.

"If I was to list out what are the key roles of the Chief Executive, or of the leadership team, number one is to get the culture in the business right. What I am clear about is that you can have the best strategy in the world, but if the culture of the business isn't right, you haven't got a hope. I can't do fifteen thousand people's jobs. I can only do one job. Number one on my list of priorities is getting the culture of the business right."

Then he explained:

"When I talk about culture I mean the innate base from which the people in the organisation will take decisions. It is absolutely fundamental, because with an organisation of any size, beyond a few people, you ultimately are relying on people taking decisions, and that's a very broad definition of decision taking, in a way that you would wish them to do. The absence of a coherent and consistent culture means that as decisions are taken on behalf of the

organisation, the outcome of that process will be random rather than consistent with how you want it to be."

That last insight is worth savouring: culture plays an essential role in the regulation of decision making.

Let's pursue that idea. There is a process to decision making, and it goes on largely below the level of our consciousness. One notable depiction of this process is the "decision-action cycle" or "O-O-D-A loop" identified by John Boyd.

Boyd's cycle sets out the sequence: observe-orient-decide-act.
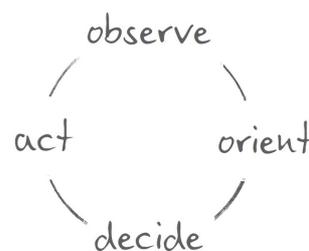
This basic loop proves to be of great value as a reference model for figuring out how organisations operate and how they might perform better. It is also relevant of course to the way individuals respond, think and act.

We see or hear something, we figure out what is going on and how we might respond, we decide what to do and we go and do it. The cycle is repeated over and over. It goes on at the macro-level in an organisation and it occurs at the individual micro-level continuously. The same basic loop, over and over. All those decisions, and the way they are made, add up to what the organisation does and how it does it. The decision-action cycle is a model for the basic unit of activity that culture regulates. Whatever the dimension of organisational performance

we might be focused on or interested in, the decision-action cycle is how the response is made when "stuff happens".

When we set out to shift culture for a business purpose, implicitly we set out to change the way the decision-action cycle is regulated at critical levels, points and places in the organisation and in the processes that go on in the business. The big prize that our businessman interviewee was after is to regulate, or at the very least positively influence, the decision-action cycle at the individual level: everywhere in the fabric of his business and at the time decisions are being made. He saw a route to do that through the culture with which he imbues his organisation.

The factors we bag up under the general category of "to do with the effect our culture has", and particularly those that we might wish to change, impinge at all points of the decision-action cycle. This stretches from inertia in the way we act, to deferring upwards when decisions are required, to unconscious bias and the heuristics that determine how we orient, analyse and "go figure". But before any of those factors kick in it is the perspective we take when we "observe" that plays the foundational role in shaping where we start our analysis from and how we subsequently proceed around the decision-action loop. "Observe" is the activity from which our patterns of thinking originate and from whence our paradigms flow. To shift our paradigm then we might start by shifting our perspective. We need to look through a different lens. So start change right there, at the beginning of the decision-action cycle, at "observe".

If the people in our organisation apply a coherent and consistent lens then the decisions taken in the organisation will flow in a coherent and consistent way: precisely what our businessman interviewee was after. If we want to steer change in the effect our culture is having then we should always change the lens our people apply. The operative part of culture becomes "the way we look at things around here", and the key questions to answer in any intervention on organisational culture should be: what should be our organisation's lens be and how should we install it?

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A "culture lens" can be made tangible. We can describe a lens in a few words and represent it with a simple picture. We can put a lens on the table in front of us and we can pick it up and walk around the room with it. Change then becomes something we can hold in our hands. We can go out with something simple and real to share with others, to start a conversation with, to set expectations around: just as the leaders did in the EMEA Division in the story at the beginning of this piece.

We can use this simple idea to reposition "culture change" in the minds of those we wish to engage from something lengthy, indistinct, and possibly unwanted, to something easy and accessible and useful to everyone in the company, from Board room to shop-floor. [Also, in the example, if the offer for customers and the proposition to employees were both to be the "easy choice", it is self-consistent that the approach to the culture change needed to get there should be "easy" too.] By changing the way we look at things, decision-action cycles can proceed in a consistent and coherent way, in line with the direction and the way the business is expected to operate, but without restricting the freedom of people anywhere in the

organisation to exercise their initiative and judgement. It is the way we look at things that is regulated, not the way we must see things. The way we see things is where our creativity lies. Facilitation and control are neatly reconciled.

The ask for change becomes simple: look differently, act accordingly. By creating a lens we shift the predominant popular operative idea of what culture is from "the way we do things around here" to "the way we look at things around here".

Changing "the way we look at things" is an easier proposition than changing "the way we do things". Getting people to suspend disbelief about change "this time", to look through a different lens to try a different perspective, and to engage around something they can hold in their hands, is tangible and a reasonable ask. The conversation is: "if this is the lens we look through, where does that take us?"

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In some arenas changing our perspective, the way we look at things, our lens, would take us a very long way indeed.

I spent time recently for a client working up a corporate position for him on the subject of "respect". Interesting project, and refreshing to find someone in business who actually wanted genuinely to stop and think about "respect" and to find out what that really means in workplace culture. The project was done as part of a push on inclusion and diversity in his company.

We started out with the observation that respect was a commonly cited factor when discussion turned to inclusion and diversity in the workplace. We had an expectation that "respect" would broadly be a commonly understood, positive idea.

One we could harness and use to promote the company's inclusion agenda. But it turned out that was not really the case. We found that respect was universally considered to be and appreciated as a factor to be valued in the workplace, but most people we spoke with found it a lot easier to describe what constitutes a lack of respect rather than to define what respect is. There was not a coherent, cohesive, consistent understanding of "respect" on which to consolidate and build. This is notable in light of how commonly "respect" is listed as a factor in "our culture" by so many businesses. Respect is one of the stock corporate values. There may however be much greater clarity about what constitutes "lack of respect" than what constitutes respect itself.

The exercise was useful to find the jumping off point for change for my client. It got a conversation going in his organisation too, so it was worthwhile from that point of view as well. It also reinforced the realisation that substantial change will happen when we change the lens we look through.

For example. What proportion of women should we aim for in managerial and leadership positions? How about 50%? Change our conception of "respect" from a noun to a verb, something we actively do rather than something we avoid the lack of, and it becomes difficult to argue on any robust rational basis for anything else. But do not expect business, or society in general for that matter, to be the same or to run as it does now when we get there: businesses with male perspective cultures just with more females involved in running them is an unlikely outcome, and certainly not a sustainable one. At a certain proportion the "minority" is going to get a voice that is properly heard and which will

genuinely start to shape the organisational culture. The way we look at things inevitably changes at that point, and must change in any case if we are to get there.

As someone who has been lumped into the category "male and pale" (which has happened to me even in the most "woke" of forums), I would still like to think that every position I have ever held in my professional career I got on merit: because I was the best candidate for the job, of course! I am not alone in kidding myself on that. The lie is given by the fact that the next person in almost always did just as good a job as me, and usually better. In reality most people are simply good enough for the jobs they do, and there are so many others who could achieve just as much and more, just differently. So if the selection criterion for the task part of a job role was to be "good enough", with that would come so much more freedom on other criteria for how we might think about placing people. That would lead to building more responsible, inclusive and diverse business organisations and cultures. Where would that take us?

To progress towards inclusion we need to challenge our presuppositions and expectations when we think of roles we want to put people in. It is not enough to put our managers and workforce through unconscious bias training, brief out our corporate values through webinars, and tick inclusion and diversity boxes on our candidate lists, but not actually change our underlying and fundamental ideals about what "different" people could bring, what we want them to contribute and how they might do it. Diversity and inclusion is not about people being different on the surface but wanting them to be the same, "people like us", underneath really. It should not be about

having a range of different colours and creeds and orientations on the payroll to point to. Inclusion is about bringing real differences together with cohesion, cooperation and control. That is what offers the big pay-off. This is one area of fertile territory right now for how culture could differentiate your organisation; there are others. But you will need to change the lens you look through to do it, if you really want to go there.

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There is an industry that has grown up around organisational culture. There is no shortage at all of observation and opinion from in-house practitioners, academics and consultants. Much of the discourse about culture though tends to be about the attributes an organisation's culture should have, the form that culture should take. Much less of it is about the role that culture plays, and how it functions. When we decide on the attributes we want for our organisation we might put in lots of effort in dialogue about corporate values just to end up reciting a catalog list of worthy societal norms or aspirations. Unless we set out to build and hold our standards higher than those of the communities and society from which we recruit, we are probably not adding much in the way of value if we simply state the obvious attributes we can all agree on. Yes, of course we want integrity and accountability, dependability, commitment, passion and teamwork. Why wouldn't we? Would we ever state that we want otherwise? Do something about these factors if there are shortfalls, of course, but is there really much value in signalling these things as corporate virtues?

A more useful and visible expression of a community's culture are the conventions

that the community develops and adopts. Adherence of a group's members to a consistent set of cultural conventions is an important means of ensuring social cohesion, and plays an essential role in exercising control of the group. Once there is momentum in a culture shift, a good way to steer the development of culture in an organisation is to promote a set of conventions that the community should want everyone to adhere to and which can be reinforced by the leaders in that community. In effect, a compass to steer by. A compass to work in harmony with the lens we look through. A compass to guide people at the "orient" stage of the decision action cycle. A compass to point up the direction we want to steer "the way we do things around here".

This is not a new idea. You will see the deliberate use of social conventions playing out most evidently in how a safety culture is developed, where we are urged to conform to conventions such as:

• never walk by

• follow procedures or say why you can't

• stop if it's not safe

• see it, sort it, report it.

The use of conventions completes the picture: a lens that sets out "the way we look at things around here" and a compass to guide us further to where that takes us. Together these provide a practical framework in response to the insight the businessman interviewed in the "What the business leader said…" study offered to the student of business.

Culture? Try this: it's the way we look at things around here.